

The Harvard Crimson

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Carl Oglesby

Silhouette

By Rand K. Rosenblatt

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Carl Oglesby, the president of Students for a Democratic Society, came to Harvard last week to talk about American foreign policy and the war in Vietnam. He spoke in an atmosphere of deepening concern: President Johnson had flown to Honolulu to embrace Marshal Ky, and The New York *Times* told us that we were in for "a long, hard, more costly and more dangerous war." In a beautifully written and tightly reasoned speech, Oglesby probed the origins of our ills. His analysis, which began by challenging American liberalism with its own promises, seemed disturbingly correct in many particulars. Above all, his formulation of some "great puzzles" seemed very close to both our academic and intimate lives.

I drove Oglesby to a friend's house after his speech in Lowell Lecture Hall, pressed him for an hour with my questions, and listened to him talk with his friends from SDS. The mood of the evening was serious and quiet, with Oglesby presenting again and again, patiently and without strain, his thoughts on theories and events in the world. He had come to radical politics slowly, after

marriage, writing plays, six years of working as an editor for defense companies, and a B.A. in English from the University of Michigan. His road to radicalism ran through Vietnam: while researching campaign speeches for a Congressional candidate in 1962, he had begun to raise questions which no one else was asking. As an unpretentious yet inspiring leader, sitting on the floor with his student friends, he gave the impression of determination, flexible enough to withstand most foreseeable setbacks, but strong enough to undertake the very long process of building a movement for significant change.

As a part of this determination, he is still asking uncomfortable questions. Oglesby began his speech. Thursday night by exploring the humane, liberal vision which leads good men to wage war in Vietnam. From this view point, we stand as a nation which endured the burdens of the Cold War in the 1950's in order to protect Western Europe and ourselves from the "social acid" of Communism. After 1962, the metabolism of the Cold War changed: for both the U.S. and the USSR, international politics became gradually secularized. The metaphysical became negotiable, the abhorrent understandable, to the extent that we could tacitly accept the Cuban revolution while the Russians could look on without much fuss as we armed West Germany with nuclear weapons.

This was the situation, at least, in Europe. In Asia we hoped to reach a similar implicit understanding with China: no big wars, and a firm division of territory. But in trying to stretch our model of the international system into Asia, Oglesby argues, we exposed some of its most inhuman possibilities. The principles which gave Western Europe a benevolent heaven of Marshall aid yielded in Asia a napalm-filled hell.

For when confronting revolutionary Asia, the humane American vision slips over into terror, and the Cold War mind -- "suspicious, dramatic, and above all, *rational*," reaches its most dangerous conclusions. To justify the defense of our wealth, and to satisfy our psyches, we see every social upheaval as a conspiracy: the National Liberation Front is controlled by Hanoi, and Hanoi by Peking. Oglesby suggests, more than half seriously, that we are fighting to show China that it *must* control Hanoi and the NLF, in order to create a rational Asian Communist coalition. We are practicing, Oglesby says, a politics of nostalgia, in which we try to recreate the post-war European encounters in Asia in order to reach a similar Cold War peace.

Oglesby questions the peace we seek as the methods of the search. Is the freedom of the underdeveloped countries really coincident with the profits of American investment? Is our support of right-wing dictatorships really conducive to peace in the long run, or will it lead to worse social conditions, more repression, more Communists, and more violent revolutions?

The point is that our decision to make war comes as much from our perceptions as from the foreign situations. And who are we? A nation which ought to know, from our own inner life in Mississippi, Harlem, and Watts, that men do not have to be foreign agents to rebel; the revolution has its foundation in basic human misery, and that only the most desperate can embrace the hallucinatory terror of a life circumscribed by the hostile power of the state. Oglesby is appalled at our leaders' ability to manipulate politics, to deceive people, and coerce our allies. He is horrified at our capacity to watch computerized slaughter on the 5 o'clock news, and to support it. He wonders "where the good Germans were in 1937 when the Stukas were bombing Madrid, or in 1941, when Eichmann began punctiliously to carry out his orders. A great puzzle, but one which is losing its distance."

What are the implications of this analysis for the editors and readers of this newspaper, when it appears likely that even we will be sent to learn about the great puzzle first-hand? After his speech in Lowell Lecture Hall, Oglesby was assailed by questions: you have brought us into black despair, what should we do practically and *now*? He admittes that his movement, and others of the radical left, do not have a full answer to that question. But he suggests that students begin by withholding their intellectual skills from those parts of society which they feel to be wrong -- and by "wrong" Oglesby means a betrayal of American humanist ideals. One eventual goal of a radical student movement, he suggests, would be education and research: to discover alternative ways to organize society and use power, to uncover dangerous myths, and to educate men's perception of what is going on.

There is an obvious tension between Oglesby's analysis of world affairs, which points to great social and economic forces as key causes, and his recommendations, which concentrate on changing men's *ideas* about society (rather than immediately challenging the material conditions of their lives). He admits this tension, ("It's like balancing on a high wire.") but sees it as a flexible pre-requisite to any broader change. He wants to exhaust the "moderate

alternatives," and if American society can fulfill its basic promises without any major structural changes, so much the better.

The radical student movement would be a spur to this development, and even within the context of the war, Oglesby is cautiously hopeful of its success. He notes that SDS is growing rapidly even without a dramatic program, and that its opposition spirit has been strengthened, not crushed, by the growing war machine.

But the present nightmare which strengthens opposition to terror also demands despair. Oglesby admits that he sometimes feels as if the movement of the 1960's will be a curious footnote in American history -- a history written in a foreign language. He notes that some tell him not to reveal this intimacy, and advise him to crusade with the fervor of a millennial faith. This, he feels, would be a fraud. And there is, perhaps, a value in the horror story. "When men begin to quake, they may begin to move."

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